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# Children of Israel: US Military Imperialism and Marshallese Migration in the Poetry of Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner

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# CHILDREN OF ISRAEL: US MILITARY IMPERIALISM AND MARSHALLESE MIGRATION IN THE POETRY OF KATHY JETNIL-KIJINER

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.....  
**Activist poetry**

**Jetnil-Kijiner**

**Kathy**

**Marshall Islands**

**nuclear testing**

**US imperialism**  
.....

*In 1946, when the US government chose Bikini atoll as a nuclear testing site, the military governor of the Marshall Islands persuaded islanders to leave their homeland on the grounds that scientists were experimenting with nuclear technology “for the good of mankind and to end all world wars”. This rhetorical sleight-of-hand holds a bitterly ironic significance given that although the Bikini Islanders believed their exile would be temporary, the resulting environmental damage from various nuclear tests has rendered the atoll uninhabitable for an estimated 30,000 years. Although the dominant discourses surrounding nuclear testing have been consistently downplayed by a US government anxious to project a narrative in which the Bikini Islanders willingly left their ancestral lands, Marshallese are still dying as a result of corporeal and environmental irradiation, diseases resulting from a forced dependency on imported western foods, and the threat of further displacement due to rising sea levels through global warming. This essay explores the imperialist legacy of US nuclear testing and responses to it in the poetry of Marshallese eco-poet Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner’s protest literature. Her work indexes displacement, health problems and ongoing sociopolitical*

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*struggles of Marshallese diasporic communities through globalized political and technological platforms such as the Internet and climate change conferences to raise awareness of, and potentially gain redress for, the socio-economic and environmental problems faced by contemporary Pacific Islanders.*

## Introduction

This essay explores the impact of globalization in the Pacific within the context of US military imperialism in Micronesia, focusing on the legacy of US Cold War nuclear testing as explored in the work of Marshallese poet-activist Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner. In a range of poems published in her debut collection *Iep Jaltok* (2017), and in various discursive interventions disseminated via the Internet, Jetnil-Kijiner has communicated to a global audience the historical circumstances and enduring human and environmental costs of US military imperialism in the Marshall Islands, chosen as the United States' nuclear laboratory in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Between 1946 and 1958, sixty-seven atmospheric and underwater nuclear tests were undertaken on the northern atolls of Bikini and Enewetak, and in 1959, shortly after President Eisenhower announced his commitment to signing a partial nuclear test ban treaty, Kwajalein atoll was then selected as the site of a long-range ballistic missile testing range that remains in use to this day.<sup>1</sup>

1 The current lease, signed in 2006, is active until 2066, with an option to renew for a further twenty years.

US military imperialism has imbricated Marshall Islanders in two inter-related processes of globalization: as the Marshall Islands became the locus of the United States' quest for world military dominance, the nuclear experiments triggered the dispersal of indigenous Marshall Islanders away from the testing sites, generating internal processes of migration from the northern to southern Marshall Islands, but also, in the longer term, precipitating Marshall Islanders into the large-scale international migrant flows of the late twentieth century and beyond. Jetnil-Kijiner's work exposes the long-term legacies of nuclear testing from the Cold War era to the present day, by exploring the intergenerational medical and socio-economic problems experienced by Marshall Islanders both within the archipelago and further afield in Hawai'i and the continental United States, where increasing numbers of Marshall Islanders have migrated, many in search of better healthcare, educational and employment opportunities, since the 1986 Compact of Free Association granted Marshall Islanders the right to work and settle in the United States. The Compact, while appearing to grant certain benefits to Micronesians, needs to be understood within the broader context of ongoing US military imperialism in the Pacific: Compact nations comprise Micronesian territories captured by the United States from Japan during the Second World War, and incorporated into a unique, UN-mandated US "Strategic Trust Territory" in 1947. The

2 The Compact devolved the Trust Territory members into four discrete sectors with varying degrees of self-government: the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of the Marshall Islands are sovereign, self-governing states; the Northern Mariana Islands are a Commonwealth of the United States; and the Republic of Palau became a sovereign state in 1994, following an ultimately unsuccessful campaign by islanders to establish a permanent nuclear-free constitution.

3 See, for example, Buell (1992); Dawson and Schueller (2007); Forsdick (2013); Hulme (1995); Kaplan and Pease (1993); King (2000); Lazarus (2006); Pease (2000); Schueller

trusteeship agreement specified that the United States should promote social, economic and political development within these islands with a view to their eventual independence. However, the unique “strategic” status of the agreement allowed the United States to transform its Micronesian territories into military colonies, and to create conditions of economic dependency that ensured islanders would have to agree to a continuing US military presence under the Compact (Hezel 1995).<sup>2</sup> Various other islands of the Pacific are incorporated to varying degrees within the United States’ military empire: for example, Guam (acquired at the conclusion of the Spanish–American War in 1898) and American Samoa (which was under US naval administration from 1900 to 1951) are US unincorporated territories, meaning that the islands have some degree of self-governance, but indigenous residents, though US citizens, are denied certain constitutional rights available to mainland Americans, and full independence has been forestalled through a combination of strategic legislation and the perpetuation of economic dependency, with a very high proportion of islanders reliant on the US military establishment for employment (Davis 2015; Fojas 2015; Hezel 1995; Keown, Taylor, and Treagus [forthcoming](#)). As Sasha Davis notes, many US territories in the Pacific have continued to be denied full independence due to their strategic (military) importance to the United States (2015, 46–47), and Cold War legacies continue to play out within Oceania well into the twenty-first century. In August 2017, for example, North Korea threatened to fire long-range missiles into the waters around Guam after the United States flew a series of heavy bombers through South Korean airspace as part of its campaign to pressure North Korea into abandoning its nuclear programme (Davis 2015, 46–47; see also Mattis 2017).

Before exploring the Marshall Islands context in more detail, it is worth situating the Pacific Cold War nuclear testing era within the *longue durée* of US imperial expansion during and beyond the nineteenth century. Since the 1990s, a burgeoning body of scholarship focused on US imperialism has accumulated, belying the popular myth of US exceptionalism based on the “apparent self-evident truth” that the American Republic “was itself the product of an anticolonial, revolutionary war against empire” and that anti-imperialism has thereafter formed a cornerstone of US national identity (McCormick 2009, 63). My exploration of US imperialism follows in the wake of an increasing number of historiographical and literary-critical explorations of this phenomenon,<sup>3</sup> but seeks to address a relative lacuna in explorations of US imperialism in the Pacific Islands, as opposed to the more widely documented territorial expansion within the continental Americas, the Caribbean and the Pacific Rim.<sup>4</sup>

Although many historical overviews of US imperialism in Oceania take as a starting point the US acquisition of Spain’s colonies at the close of the Spanish–American War in 1898, as Paul Lyons points out, the United States established maritime and commercial interests in the Pacific from the

(2004); Singh and Schmidt (2000).

4 Existing scholarly explorations of US imperialism *vis-à-vis* indigenous Pacific Islands literatures and cultures are often strongly oriented towards Hawai'i rather than Micronesia; see, for example, Lyons (2005); Najita (2006); Wilson (2000).

early nineteenth century, as it began to expand its territorial and trade frontiers after declaring its independence from Britain (Lyons 2005, 29–30). Initial incursions centred on the whaling (and fur seal) industry, but traders soon followed, dealing in commodities such as sandalwood, copra, pearls and pearl shells, and *bêche de mer* (a sea slug sold as a delicacy in China). US missionaries followed in the wake of these agents of economic expansion, arriving in the Hawaiian Islands in 1820 and enlisting native converts to spread US “influence” and trade to other islands, particularly the Marshall, Western Caroline and Gilbert Island groups. These various commercial endeavours necessitated access to a string of ports across the Pacific (for naval vessels protecting shipping lanes, and for coaling stations and access to other supplies), and a whole supporting bureaucratic system was established by the time of the US Civil War. As Lyons notes, rather than being the last frontier of westward US expansion, the Pacific was imbricated in US territorial growth throughout the nineteenth century, with Honolulu functioning as the “business hub” of Oceania long before San Francisco “became a commercial centre or California a US state” (2005, 29, 30). Thus, Pacific Islanders were drawn into processes of economic globalization long before the United States’ rise to world military dominance, and while many scholars have documented the ways in which this contributed to the erosion of indigenous Pacific lifeways and left islanders vulnerable to annexation by Europeans, others, including Tongan scholar Epeli Hau’ofa, have interpreted these dynamics as a continuation of patterns of “world enlargement” and inter-island trade and travel that existed in Oceania well before the arrival of European colonists (Hau’ofa 2008; see also Edmond 1997; Keown and Murray 2013; Thomas 2010).

The establishment of these capitalist networks during the nineteenth century inevitably generated an expanding US military presence in Oceania, both in order to protect trading posts and settlements, and to utilize strategically located islands as transit points or buffers between the continental United States and other powerful Pacific nations. As Lyons argues, since the days of the early American Republic, Pacific islands have been envisioned as “stepping stones (provisioning and refuelling stations, colonial outposts, communication centres, military bases) or passages (shipping lane protectors) toward the wealth of the Orient and the Indies”, valued “primarily for the quality and location of their harbours (Pearl, Apia, Pago Pago) and natural resources...to be traded in Asia” (2005, 24). Where nineteenth-century endeavours focused primarily on the expansion of trade, the twentieth century witnessed an increasingly military-focused foreign policy.

The Second World War was a crucial moment in the transition to US military dominance in the Pacific. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 was mounted partly as a result of Japan’s own colonial ambitions in the Pacific, and although the United States had initially remained neutral

during the Pacific war, the retaliation against Japan created an opportunity not just to capture the Micronesian territories Japan had taken from Germany during the First World War (and fortified in preparation for Japan's planned expansion further into the Pacific), but also to develop and test its fledgling nuclear technology, first on Japan and then on the Micronesian islands it captured from Japanese military forces. Though early US atomic discourse, and particularly rhetoric surrounding the nuclear programme in Micronesia, was permeated with Christian allusions that elided the destructive power of the bomb in favour of foregrounding its putatively redemptive potential as a vehicle for world peace, the US development of nuclear technology was designed to safeguard national rather than global security interests (Keown [forthcoming](#)). Throughout the twentieth century, as Davis notes, the United States' Pacific island colonies became "critical nodes in the global projection of American military power", deployed to establish "global reach" for US bombers, and bases to protect trade areas, to test missile defence systems, and to provide training grounds for soldiers garrisoned overseas (2015, 46). With the advent of the Cold War, the Micronesian islands the United States had captured from the Japanese gained additional importance as strategic sites protecting the US mainland from potential attacks from the Soviet Union, and the United States chose the Marshall Islands as the locus of its attempts to become the world leader in nuclear technology.

### ***The Marshall Islands as nuclear laboratory***

Following the Trinity test in New Mexico and the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, Bikini and Enewetak atolls in the northern Marshall Islands were selected as ideal sites for further tests, given that they were under US military control; distant from heavily populated areas; and at least 500 miles away from all major sea and air routes (Barker 2004, 20; Keown [forthcoming](#); Teaiwa 2008). The residents of these atolls had to be evacuated in order for testing to take place, and significantly, the military governor of the Marshall Islands, Commodore Ben Wyatt, appealed to the New England Protestant values that were by then well established within Marshallese society in order to persuade the 166 residents of Bikini atoll – the chosen site of the first nuclear test – to relocate to Rongerik, a smaller neighbouring island where resources soon proved inadequate for sustaining the islanders' diet and material cultural practices (Kiste 1974, 27; Niedenthal 2001). When he met with the Bikinians on 10 February 1946 (following their Sunday morning church service), Wyatt explained that scientists were experimenting with nuclear technology "for the good of mankind and to end all world wars". In referring to the planned relocation of the Marshallese, he



compared them to the “children of Israel whom the Lord saved from their enemy and led unto the Promised Land” (Mason 1954, 263; see also Kiste 1974, 27–28). In retrospect, there is a particular resonance and pathos attached to the analogy with the Israelites in exile, because to this day the radiation levels on Bikini are still so high that resettlement is deemed unsafe, and Bikinians are currently dispersed throughout various other islands in the Marshall group, particularly the islands of Kili and Ejit in the South, as well as within various locations in the United States, including Hawai‘i, Arkansas, Oregon and Washington.

At the time the Bikinians were persuaded to leave their atoll, the United States was anxious to project to a global audience the impression that the islanders willingly agreed to their displacement: although the Bikinians had a limited grasp of English and the services of a translator were required, Wyatt later reported that Bikini’s paramount chief, Juda, had told him “my people will be pleased to go elsewhere” in order to allow “the United States government and the scientists of the world” to “use our island and atoll for furthering development, which with God’s blessing will result in kindness and benefit to all mankind” (Kiste 1974, 27–28; Mason 1954, 263). Wyatt’s summary oversimplifies the complexities of the decision Juda was forced to make; testimonies subsequently gathered from Bikinians present at the deliberations indicate that the islanders were highly reluctant to leave their homeland, and only did so because they were assured their exile would be temporary (Niedenthal 2001). As Davis observes, the final month the Bikinians spent living on their island was turned into a media “spectacle” that “helped cement the idea in the world’s imagination that the Bikini Islanders were primitive, Christianized, loyal subjects sacrificing themselves to the greater good of the United States”: scores of reporters and filmmakers visited the island, and the final Bikinian church service was performed three times so cameras could adopt differing angles on the ceremony (2015, 63–64). Media reports misrepresented the islanders forced to leave their ancestral lands as primitive “nomadic” peoples gratefully leaving environments deficient in resources. Further, US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s alleged comment “There are only ninety thousand people out there. Who gives a damn?” points towards well-established colonial stereotypes of the Pacific as a backward, comparatively empty space inviting western incursion and occupation (Hau‘ofa 2008; Keown forthcoming).

International media played a significant role in deflecting public attention from the destructive consequences of the bomb tests, partly via a commercial sleight-of-hand in which Bikini, which means “beach” in Marshallese, became thereafter most readily associated with the two-piece bathing suit invented by French designer Louis Reard in 1946. Reard’s creation was posited as a celebration of the triumph of Allied military forces during the Second World War, but it also effected a discursive slippage by proffering the sexual allure of the



scantly clad female body as a replacement signifier for a site of extreme military violence (Teaiwa 2008). Though the bikini bathing suit was initially designed for western women, as Teaiwa notes, its “semi-nudity also reflects a conjunction between conceptions of the neoclassical and the South Sea noble savage” that has its origins in eighteenth-century European colonial discourse, thereby exoticizing “generic female bodies by constructing them as references to a Grecian Golden Age and a South Seas Paradise” (2000, 93). Teaiwa’s term “militourism”, which refers to contexts in which “military or paramilitary force ensures the smooth running of a tourist industry, and that same tourist industry masks the military force behind it”, applies to Bikini alongside a number of comparable sites within Oceania (1999, 251).

### **Day of two suns: the BRAVO nuclear disaster**

In 1954, US military operations in the Marshall Islands were again brought to the world’s attention with the detonation of the 15-megaton BRAVO bomb, the largest and dirtiest hydrogen bomb ever tested by the United States. Almost one thousand times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb, the BRAVO shot – which created much greater devastation than atomic bomb technology by fusing rather than splitting atoms – vapourized three islands on Bikini Atoll, left a mile-wide crater through the reef and spread radioactive fallout across the inhabited northern Marshall Islands, particularly Rongelap and Utirik (Davis 2015, 53). Widely considered the world’s first nuclear disaster, the BRAVO bomb created much greater environmental and human damage than the United States had anticipated, and generated negative global publicity after a member of a visiting Japanese fishing crew inadvertently exposed to fallout died of radiation poisoning, prompting the Japanese government to demand an inquiry (Davis 2015). The larger numbers of Marshall Islanders exposed to fallout, however, escaped the attention of the global press, and were treated with apparent indifference by US military personnel. No one informed the islanders of the impending test, and the massive fireball that appeared in the sky after the detonation was mistaken for a second sunrise by terrified witnesses. A few hours after the blast, fallout began to descend on the islands to the east of the testing site, mistaken for snow by islanders whose children played in the contaminated debris that fell from the sky (Dibblin 1988). Though ships of the US Joint Task Force passed near Rongelap a few hours after the blast, they failed to evacuate the island’s inhabitants. The following day “RadSafe” radiation monitoring crews landed in Rongelap lagoon and ran Geiger counters over sand, soil and plants, telling islanders not to drink the water, but no further intervention was made until the morning of the third day after the detonation, when the

Rongelap people were evacuated to Kwajalein for medical examinations and treatment. The people of Utirik were not evacuated until the fourth day after the blast. By this point the exposed islanders were suffering severe symptoms of radiation poisoning. The official US explanation was that the wind direction had changed unexpectedly and that they had not anticipated that islanders would be exposed to fallout, but many Marshallese believe they were deliberately exposed so that the United States could study the effects of radiation on the human body (Davis 2015, 66; Firth and von Strokirch 1997, 329; Keown 2007, 90, 92).

Such claims are corroborated by both Holly Barker and Barbara Johnston's detailed analysis of US government documents released in the early 1990s, when a declassification order supporting an Advisory Commission on Human Radiation investigation forced bilateral disclosure to the Marshall Islands government (Johnston 2015, 145). The documents reveal that just six hours prior to the BRAVO test, the military was informed by government meteorologists that the wind was blowing in the direction of the inhabited islands of Rongelap and Rongerik, but chose to detonate the bomb without evacuating the islanders, even though evacuations had taken place for previous – and smaller – atomic bomb tests. Barker argues the declassified documents reveal that “BRAVO was purposefully designed to produce as much local fallout as possible both to reduce international criticism about worldwide fallout and to create a laboratory in the Marshall Islands to study the effects of radiation” (2004, 40; see also Firth 1987, 9). The extensive symptoms of radiation poisoning manifested by the islanders were carefully documented by US researchers on Kwajalein atoll, and although the United States claimed officially that the health of Marshallese exposed to fallout was restored within a few months, a range of longer-term serious health problems, such as cancers, paralysis, thyroid problems and birth defects, afflict Marshallese to this day (Firth and von Strokirch 1997, 329–330; Johnston 2015). After medical evidence of long-term health problems in irradiated Marshallese came to light in the 1960s, the US government acknowledged that a very small range of these, such as thyroid problems, and one leukaemia case, had resulted from nuclear testing, but has only monitored the health of Marshallese from four northern groups officially recognized as affected by fallout (Bikini, Enewetak, Utirik and Rongelap), even though the spread of fallout and attendant health problems to other areas of the Marshall Islands has been documented (Firth 1987, 40, 45; Firth and von Strokirch 1997, 331; Johnston 2015, 147). The people of the officially recognized “radiation atolls” have suffered additional health problems, such as obesity and diabetes, as a result of dependence on imported western foods necessitated by the contamination of traditional food sources by radioactive isotopes, or through enforced relocations to islands deficient in natural resources (Barker 2004, 22; Firth 1987, 30, 37–38).

Radiation poisoning has been described by eco-critic Rob Nixon as a form of “slow violence”, a “delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space”. In discussing the “long dyings” that result “from war’s toxic aftermaths or climate change”, he notes “the staggered and staggeringly discounted casualties, both human and ecological ... are underrepresented in strategic planning as well as in human memory” (2011, 1–2). As Nixon observes, such forms of slow violence are disproportionately evident in “poor” communities of the global South, such as those Pacific island nations suffering the consequences of US nuclear colonialism (33). “In an age that venerates instant spectacle”, Nixon remarks, slow violence “is deficient in the recognizable special effects that fill movie theatres and boost ratings on TV”, with chemical and radiological violence, particularly in the “bodies of the poor”, remaining “largely unobserved, undiagnosed, and untreated” (6). Nixon’s observations are borne out in the fact that the disastrous effects of nuclear testing upon the health of the Marshallese people across generations have largely been ignored and suppressed by the United States and other western nuclear powers. As noted above, there was a flurry of international media attention at the time of the BRAVO bomb due to the radiation exposure of the Japanese fishing crew, but the long-term effects of radiation and displacement upon the Marshallese have barely been registered outside the indigenous community (Davis 2015, 63–64, 133; see also Keju-Johnson 1987). This is in spite of robust public protests on the part of the Marshallese, who unsuccessfully petitioned the United Nations for a halt to nuclear testing immediately after the BRAVO bomb, and have filed multiple claims – with very limited success in terms of reparations<sup>5</sup> – against the US government for the environmental and physical damage wreaked by years of nuclear testing (Barker 2004, 34, 24; Firth and von Strokirch 1997, 331–332; Teaiwa 2000).

### **“Stories we remember”: critiques of US imperialism in the work of Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner**

Following in the wake of various Marshallese female activists, including Darlene Keju-Johnson and Lijon Eknlang, who have brought the Marshallese struggle for nuclear justice to global attention via petitions to the Hague and other international organizations, performance poet Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner has raised international awareness of US military imperialism in Micronesia via a range of media. Like many young contemporary Pacific creative practitioners, Jetnil-Kijiner has utilized the Internet as a means by which to reach a globally dispersed audience of Pacific Islanders as well as non-Oceania, and her status as a member of the Marshallese international diaspora

(having grown up in Hawai'i) has meant that her work is attuned to the multiple modalities of US imperialism both within and beyond the Marshall Islands.

As is the case with the work of many other indigenous Pacific authors (see Keown [forthcoming](#)), Jetnil-Kijiner's work is closely attuned to the environmental damage wreaked upon the Pacific as a result of nuclear testing and other western geopolitical manoeuvres. She has become widely known as a "climate change poet" since being selected to speak at the opening ceremony of the UN Climate Summit in New York in September 2014, where she offered an impassioned commentary on the dangers global warming presents for Pacific Islanders, accompanied by a performance poem addressed to her baby daughter. Entitled "Dear Matafele Peinem", the poem outlines the catastrophic consequences of global warming for the Marshalls and other low-lying Pacific islands, which will disappear below sea level if global temperatures rise by the 2° limit widely advocated by governments committed to mitigating global warming (Jetnil-Kijiner [2014a](#), [2014b](#)). Jetnil-Kijiner attended COP21, the global conference on climate change held in Paris in December 2015, where she advocated a lower target of 1.5° in order to preserve her homeland. Though the Marshallese population is comparatively small (53,000 as of January 2016), and has not achieved the same level of indigenous ecopolitical mobilization as other Pacific nations such as Hawai'i and Aotearoa/New Zealand (Huggan and Tiffin [2009](#); Keown [2007](#); Najita [2006](#); Trask [1999](#)), through social media Jetnil-Kijiner and fellow Marshallese activists initiated a robust public campaign in which Marshallese of all generations produced art, music and Web publicity advocating the 1.5° threshold. Significantly, this was the target eventually negotiated in the Paris Agreement formalized in November 2016. Though Jetnil-Kijiner is modest about the degree of influence she and her fellow Marshallese had over that decision, her work has undeniably reached a much wider audience, both within and beyond the Pacific, through social media such as her blog ([www.jkijiner.wordpress.com](http://www.jkijiner.wordpress.com)) and Web links to recordings of her performance poetry. Aside from the millions of international viewers who have accessed Jetnil-Kijiner's 2014 address and poem on the UN Web TV site ([www.webtv.un.org](http://www.webtv.un.org)), or through shared links on Youtube, Facebook and other sites, hundreds of thousands more have viewed recordings of her performance poems, interviews and lectures on the Internet. Jetnil-Kijiner also featured, along with eleven other female climate change activists, in an issue of *Vogue* magazine published to coincide with the COP21 conference (Russell [2015](#)).

In Youtube interviews about her work, Jetnil-Kijiner has argued that she selected performance poetry as her favoured genre because poetry "brings humanity", "touches people" and conveys "stories we remember" in a way that bald facts and statistics cannot. She also reveals that she began

experimenting with the genre while living in California, as a means by which to address the lack of awareness among Americans about the history of nuclear testing and other facets of US imperialism in the Marshall Islands (Jetnil-Kijiner 2014c, 2015). As Selina Tusitala Marsh notes, many contemporary indigenous Pacific performance poets draw inspiration from Black American and Caribbean antecedents, including slam, spoken word and dub poetry. Marsh cites Barbadian poet-scholar E. Kamau Brathwaite's claim that performance poetry is "all about relationships" as a useful point of departure for analysing Pacific material, much of which privileges intersubjective relationships between artists, audiences and entire communities (Marsh 2010, 207–208). Such dynamics are also rooted in indigenous oral traditions throughout the Pacific, evident in speech-making, church sermons, prayer, dance and drama, in which artists and performers establish an actively dialogical relationship with the audience, members of which will frequently offer vocal interjections and other audible responses throughout a performance (Marsh 2010, 213). These intersubjective relationships can involve the dead as well as the living: in Samoan *fale aitu* (comic theatre), for example, actors are customarily taken as embodiments of ancestors,<sup>6</sup> and in Maori oratory, speakers begin with "a symbolic calling forth of ancestors and those present into a relationship, into a conversation" (Marsh 2010, 212–213; Sinavaiana-Gabbard 1999).

Such details offer an illuminating framework within which to consider the content and performative context of Jetnil-Kijiner's "History Project", a performance poem that dramatizes her childhood struggle to break free of the depersonalizing rhetoric of atomic discourse and offer an embodied, indigenous articulation of the material history of nuclear violence in the Marshall Islands. The poem, recordings of which are posted on Jetnil-Kijiner's blog site as well as on various websites associated with her participation in the "Poetry Parnassus" event held during the 2012 Olympics,<sup>7</sup> begins with the lyric "I", a version of the poet's younger self, working independently on a self-selected school history project on nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands. Jetnil-Kijiner recalls as a 15-year-old "sifting" through statistics and photographs recording the moment at which the Bikinians agreed to leave their atoll; a child suffering radiation injuries under observation by an ostensibly indifferent US researcher; animals left as test subjects on naval ships; and US marines and medical staff enjoying leisure time – Teaiwa's "militourism" – on Marshallese beaches. The so-called official record of this US archive is juxtaposed with the testimonies of irradiated Marshallese women describing giving birth to "jelly babies" (severely deformed, boneless infants who died within hours) and suffering multiple miscarriages which they were too ashamed to reveal to their husbands (not least because, as Lijon Eknilang has pointed out, within Marshallese culture reproductive problems are widely believed to result from women being unfaithful to their husbands

6 *Fale aitu* can be translated as 'house of spirits'.

7 This event involved representatives from the 160 nations taking part in the London 2012 Olympics reading and recording their work during a week-long gathering co-organized by the Southbank Centre and the London 2012 Festival.

[International Court of Justice 1995, 27]). In the published version of her poem, Jetnil-Kijiner switches into italics to render the voices of these women in the first person, for example in the lines “*I thought/there must be something/wrong/inside me*” (2017, 21). In her recorded performance she embodies the suffering of these women, creating a community of presence by ventriloquizing the voices of multiple compatriots. At the point at which Jetnil-Kijiner reflects on the disingenuous US claim that the testing was “for the good of mankind” and the spurious reassurance that “God will thank you”, the intensity and horror in her voice escalates as she transmutes from a 15-year-old researcher encountering this historic material to a present-day embodiment of that community of exiled Bikinians, remarking with bitter irony “yea/as if God himself/ordained/those powdered flakes [fallout]/to drift/onto *our* skin hair eyes/to seep into *our* bones” (21, my italics). She turns Christian rhetoric to anticolonial purposes, figuring the Marshallese as sacrificial victims punished for “all humanity’s sins”, which they “vomit” onto Bikini’s “impeccable white shores”. Here, Christian and nuclear metaphors of purity and light are oxymoronically reconfigured as a “gleaming” cross “burned” into the palms of the irradiated islanders, forming stigmata which they carry to the present day in the form of cancers, birth defects and other illnesses (22).

The poem reaches its climax at the point at which Jetnil-Kijiner reveals that while thousands of US citizens wrote letters to protest against the “abuse” of the animals exposed to radiation, no one appeared to care about the devastation wreaked upon the Marshallese people. Certainly, the lack of awareness among the US public about the effects of nuclear testing on Marshallese was in no small part due to the US government’s withholding of information from all but a carefully selected range of politicians, scientists and military staff closely involved with the testing programme. In light of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) documents declassified during the 1990s, Jetnil-Kijiner’s incredulity about Americans putting animals “above human beings” has a terrible resonance. At an internal AEC meeting in 1956, for example, during a discussion of project 4.1 (a classified programme monitoring the effects of radiation on Marshallese health) a scientist identified recently resettled Utrik as an ideal research site, remarking:

Now that Island ... is by far the most contaminated place in the world and it will be very interesting to go back and get good environmental data ... so as to get a measure of the human uptake when people live in a contaminated environment. Now, data of this type has never been available. While it is true that these people do not live, I would say, the way westerners do, civilized people, it is nevertheless also true that these people are more like us than mice. (Atomic Energy Commission 1956; see also Barker 2004, 45; Johnston 2015, 146)

These comments accord the Marshallese a sub-human status, positing them as biologically similar to westerners but culturally inferior, treating them therefore as equivalent to animals selected for vivisection. As Barbara Johnston notes, project 4.1 was instituted under the guise of humanitarian aid, without the knowledge or consent of the Marshallese test subjects, and the classified nature of the research meant that knowledge of the full extent of documented damage and injury resulting from nuclear testing was not available to Marshallese people until these confidential documents were declassified in the 1990s (Johnston 2015, 146).

Jetnil-Kijiner explains that as a 15-year-old, she could only express her rage and horror in a 3D project presentation for an inter-school history competition, ironically labelled “FOR THE GOOD OF MANKIND”, the significance of which is misunderstood by the three white judges who are assessing the entries and who refuse to award the young Jetnil-Kijiner a prize. As an adult performance poet, however, Jetnil-Kijiner is able to make an intervention that has registered upon an international audience through global media networks. Her poem is not simply personal testimony but an embodied “history from below”, recording the voices and experiences of multiple generations of Marshallese. Her approach eschews the often uncritical enlistment of abstraction and metaphor that critics such as Rob Wilson and Elizabeth DeLoughrey identify as a dominant strand of atomic discourse: Wilson observes that in postmodern US poetry, the nuclear sublime is often described as an “unspeakable force” that reduces the subject “to languagelessness, almost bodily sublation” (1989, 409), while DeLoughrey opines that although radiation is carried within the human body as a “form of memory”, it is “invisible to narrative and to history” as a result of “the process of transference, diversion, and/or substitution made possible by metaphor”, which effects a form of displacement and “eclipses” other possible “modes of relation” (2011, 245). By contrast, Jetnil-Kijiner’s poem presents a material history of the drastic and often unseen (or unacknowledged) consequences of irradiation, and exposes the spurious nature of the Christian rhetoric that has been enlisted to euphemize the horrific consequences of nuclear testing. Notably, Jetnil-Kijiner also interweaves this imagery with familiar tropes of the Pacific paradise, in her description of trees laden with fruit, fish that “sparkle” like “new sun” and “brilliant” coral reefs beneath a “glassy sea”. Here, she enlists heliotropic and Edenic rhetoric in a manner which points towards the indigenous material losses belied by hyperreal tourist advertising and atomic propaganda. In this sense, colonial tropes, stereotypes and rhetorical subterfuge are subject to satirical commentary throughout the poem, becoming an example of what Lawrence Buell terms “contemporary toxic discourse” (2009, 37).

In a range of other poems published in her 2017 collection, Jetnil-Kijiner links the intergenerational health problems suffered by Marshallese with



processes of internal and international displacement, positing ill-health as a form of psychological exile. In “Fishbone Hair”, dedicated to her niece Bianca, who died of leukaemia, Jetnil-Kijiner recounts her discovery of ziplock bags “stuffed” with “rolls” of long hair Bianca lost during chemotherapy. Her evocative reference to “rootless hair ... without a home” recalls the exile of the nuclear nomads of the northern atolls. Similarly, references to “white cells” that “conquered the territory of [Bianca’s] tiny body” posit the suffering child as a metaphorical nuclear testing site, with the slow violence of radiation poisoning manifesting in her DNA generations after the original detonations (2017, 24–25). A cascading set of words, “It/all/fell/out” evokes the descent of radioactive particles onto the bodies of the Cold War fallout victims, as well as referring more directly to Bianca’s alopecia, with the “rootless” ziplocked rolls of hair remaining as a legacy for the grieving poet and her family.

The intense feelings of “rootlessness” sustained by members of the international Marshallese diaspora are further explored in Jetnil-Kijiner’s poem “Lessons from Hawaii”, which draws on the sense of alienation she herself suffered as a young Marshall Islander growing up in Hawai‘i. As one of the most recent diasporic communities to establish a significant presence in the United States, COFA migrants have been subjected to widespread racial discrimination, perceived as low-skilled supplicants who drain the social welfare system and make no attempt to assimilate to US culture (Lyons and Tengan 2015). Jetnil-Kijiner notes the ways in which local ignorance of the histories and cultures of the United States’ former Trust territories results in Marshall Islanders being lumped together with the many other COFA migrants as “MICRO/(nesian)/as in small./tiny crumbs of islands” that “no one ... cares about.” Resentment and xenophobia motivate callous comments like “*We shoulda jus nuked their islands when we had the chance*” and generates social Darwinist jokes comparing Micronesian women to “*monkeys*” (2017, 47–48, italics in original).<sup>8</sup> Jetnil-Kijiner quotes inflammatory newspaper headlines that claim “MICRONESIANS FILL HOMELESS SHELTERS” and “RUN UP HEFTY HEALTHCARE TAB[S]”, noting how these have fuelled racist assumptions that COFA migrants are both culpable for their own social problems and paradoxically “*better off living homeless in Hawai‘i*” than in their own putatively underdeveloped home islands (47–48, emphasis in the original). These references to homelessness have a bitter resonance for Marshallese nuclear refugees: exiled Bikinians, for example, face the prospect of permanent exile from their ancestral lands, as well as the threat of further displacement from their new environments due to rising sea levels and other effects of global climate change. Kili island in particular has experienced increasingly severe flooding in recent years (Niedenthal 2001).

8 Jetnil-Kijiner uses italics to distinguish the comments of racists from her own words.

9 During an interview, Kathy pointed out that the poem (which is based on the experience of one of her cousins, whose lifelong home was destroyed) focuses on the ‘core resilience’ of Marshall Islanders, particularly women, as a means by which to counteract dominant ‘sinking islands and victims’ narratives (personal communication, 10th May 2017).

10 The project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). I wish to thank these councils, and the University of Edinburgh, for their generous funding and support for this project.

Significantly, Jetnil-Kijiner avoids positing islanders simply as helpless victims of global forces beyond their control. “There’s a journalist here”, one of the later poems in her 2017 collection, features a woman whose house has been destroyed by flooding resisting the fatalistic testimony that western journalists expect her to offer them, instead finding reserves of resilience within herself and “imagining” herself rehoused and moving confidently “forward” (74).<sup>9</sup> The fact that she imagines this new home on a “grassy hillside” – an environment not readily associated with the Marshall Islands, which comprise low-lying atolls and islands averaging only 2 m above sea level – evokes Hau’ofa’s positive model of Oceanic international migration as “world enlargement”. In this context it is significant that several of the poems in the collection celebrate Marshallese navigatory and seafaring traditions, signalling that migration and adaptation are central to Marshallese culture. This is not to downplay the devastating effects upon Marshall Islanders of forced displacement as a result of US military imperialism and climate change, but rather to point to a core of resilience that Jetnil-Kijiner identifies as central to Marshallese culture, and particularly to Marshallese women. Marshallese culture is traditionally matrilineal, and throughout her collection Jetnil-Kijiner pays tribute to powerful women, including her own mother Hilda Heine, who was elected as President of the Marshall Islands in 2016. She further names the collection *Iep Jaltok* after a Marshallese proverb, translated as “A basket whose opening is facing the speaker” to refer to the symbolic “wealth” girls offer their relatives.

Jetnil-Kijiner’s own poetry and activism draw on the wealth of knowledge she has gained not just from her cultural predecessors but also as a diasporic Marshall Islander participating in electronic networks that foster transnational links between globally dispersed Pacific Islanders. As Arjun Appadurai notes, electronic media circuits can become “crucibles of a postnational political order” as well as fostering “long-distance nationalism” (1996, 22). In my own research project funded by the UK’s Global Challenges Research Fund, and along with an international team of researchers and artists, we have been exploring the potential of this postnationalism.<sup>10</sup> As part of the project, Jetnil-Kijiner has run poetry-writing workshops with Marshallese schoolchildren in Majuro, Ejit and Honolulu. The project, which investigates the legacies of forced displacement for Marshall Islanders located across the archipelago of the Republic of Marshall Islands (RMI) and Hawai‘i, seeks to link globally dispersed Marshall Islanders through a website featuring the children’s work,<sup>11</sup> new poetry by Jetnil-Kijiner, and a range of other creative work, including a graphic novel created by Hawaiian multimedia artist Solomon Enos that explores RMI’s nuclear history. A central goal is also to raise international awareness of the history of US military imperialism in the Marshall Islands, and to support the ongoing Marshallese campaign for adequate compensation from the US government. The commitment of the

11 See [www.map.llc.ed.ac.uk](http://www.map.llc.ed.ac.uk).

RMI government, NGOs and other organizations to the ongoing campaign for nuclear justice was reiterated at the inaugural international Nuclear Legacy conference held in Majuro in 2017, where participants renewed requests for the full disclosure by the United States of all its documentation relating to the nuclear tests; for the decontamination of irradiated islands; and for full compensation for nuclear victims and their descendants. President Heine, who attended the conference, observed that the event “energized and empowered” large numbers of young attendees, whom she identified as “our upcoming leaders and advocates who will carry ... the torch” in “our journey towards justice” (Hosia 2017, 4). As a poet, her daughter Jetnil-Kijiner is playing a central role in galvanizing those young people, both through online media networks widely used by this demographic and through her non-profit youth environmental activist organization Jo Jikum, which at the time of writing this essay featured the following words on the banner of its Facebook page: “The US still owes Marshall Islanders over \$2 billion for the effects of the 67 nuclear weapons detonated on their islands.” Such forms of grassroots globalization are mobilizing internationally dispersed Marshallese youth in new forms of world enlargement, transcending geographical and conceptual boundaries established by the United States and other imperial nations who once divided Oceania’s vast sea of islands between themselves.

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